

THE WORKINGMEN'S GUILDS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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1943

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SKETCH

WORKINGMEN'S guilds are one of the greatest needs of the working classes. Man is not intended to live alone: in the thousand difficulties of life, he needs the support of his fellows, and, in turn, he is bound to hold out a helping hand to those of his brothers who are in distress. This is especially true of the working classes. In isolation they are weak and defenseless. In fraternal union with their comrades, they can form wonderful societies from which they can always obtain help and protection.

The Catholic Church, that mother so full of care for all her children, but above all for the poor and the weak, provided admirably for this social need. Under her influence and with her aid, workingmen's guilds arose in splendid fashion all over Catholic Europe. These magnificent associations were the glory and the strength of the workers of humble means, and flourished wonderfully throughout the Middle Ages. In those days they shared the respect which was everywhere shown to the Church herself, but according as religion lost its hold on the minds and hearts of the peoples, the prosperity of the guilds began to decline. Yet they are so necessary to the world they have come down through the ages from the very dawn of Christian society and they have never ceased to form an integral part of civilization.

Every century has benefited by them, with the single exception of our own. The nineteenth century alone has seen workingmen isolated from one another, with no bond between them, reduced to the condition of grains of dust blown about by the wind, and finally falling into an undeserved state of misery and misfortune. What was the reason of this? Because the French Revolution in its furious hatred of religion wanted to ([page 42](#)) destroy everything that religion had created, and the guilds were the first victims of that lust of destruction. All workingmen ought to know and detest the Chapelier Law of June 14-27, 1791, of which the first article runs as follows: "As one of the fundamental

principles of the French Constitution is the annihilation of every kind of guild for citizens of the same status or profession, it is forbidden to re-establish them, under any pretext or in any form whatsoever."

It may be truthfully said that that law constituted the most abominable crime ever committed against the interests of the workingman during the nineteen hundred years of Christianity. Nearly all the misfortunes of the modern worker have arisen from the fact that, when large-scale industry took its rise, he found himself deprived of the numberless resources with which guild organization would have furnished him, to prevent economic decay.

Let the modern worker, therefore, read this little work which is written specially for him. He will see from it the enviable position to which the guild-system raised workingmen in former times: he will learn upon what conditions he will be able, if he wishes, to win back his lost position in society.

CHAPTER II GENERAL IDEA OF THE GUILD

DEFINITION OF THE GUILD

What was a workers' or an artisans' guild in the Middle Ages?

It was a society composed of people of the same profession who, animated by feelings of fraternal charity as members of Christ, banded themselves together to practise their craft honestly, to watch over the interests of their members, and to give loyal service to the public.

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE GUILDS

Born of the solidarity of the Mystical Body of Christ, the workingmen's guilds carried the imprint of their origin. Membership ([page 43](#)) of Christ through the Catholic Church was required for entrance, as also the

fulfillment of the duties, religious and moral, that go with the Catholic name. Every guild was under the protection of a saint, whose feast was celebrated with great solemnity, and to whom it dedicated a chapel, if possible, or, its means did not allow of that, at least an altar, in the parish church. All guilds considered it an honor to figure in a body at the great religious feasts, especially in the processions, wherein they unfurled their banners, and had their position assigned, according to an unvarying tradition. The patronal feast usually came to an end with a merry banquet, at which all the guildsmen met in friendly companionship, and from which license was excluded, but jollity never lacking.

The guildsmen fulfilled the obligations of fraternal charity towards one another. In all the great moments of life the worker found his fellow guildsmen around him, to share his happiness on the day of his marriage, by their presence at the festivities, and to pay him the last respects at his death. Joys and sorrows were in common: everybody prayed for everybody else: religion lent dignity to rejoicing and afforded consolation in bereavement.

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

Most of the guilds organized a scheme of mutual assistance among their members and came actively and charitably to the aid of those who had fallen into misfortune. Oftentimes they gave a dowry to the daughters of the poorer colleagues or defrayed the expenses of the education of their orphans. Thanks to a small subscription, sick members were, during the time they were incapacitated for work, in receipt of an income that preserved them from destitution. Several guilds even found the means of assuaging the more cruel kinds of suffering outside their own ranks, and bestowed ample alms on leper-houses and hospitals.

THE GUILDS AS CIVIC PERSONALITIES

The guilds were recognized by the civil authorities as institutions of public utility and enjoyed all the advantages of civic (page 44)

personality. They had their funds, their premises, their coats of arms, their banners, their archives, their seal, their revenues: in one word they had everything that a rich and influential person has. Above all they had their own regulations drawn up by themselves which constituted for them a veritable charter. They had, it is true, to have their charter approved either by the municipal council or by the supreme authority of the region: but the intervention of these higher powers was ordinarily limited to a simple function of control with a view to prevent conflicts either between the crafts themselves, or between the crafts and the general interest or common good of the community. Apart from this the autonomy of the guilds was complete, and they regulated their own affairs without any outside interference.

THEIR METHOD OF GOVERNMENT

They were governed by their own members, freely elected, according to a mode of election that varied from guild to guild and from town to town. It is a curious thing, but one finds on studying their electoral procedure, that these worthy artisans of other days had foreseen and eliminated most of the abuses that we are trying to get rid of to-day. It must be added that everybody was obliged to vote, and no one, except for most serious reasons, might refuse to accept a charge conferred upon him by vote. On the other hand, the statutes generally forbade the appointment of anyone to the same office twice in succession.

The elected heads of the guild were the governors or deans, either two or four in number. They were assisted by several assessors, by a clerk or secretary, a fund-holder or treasurer, and they had one or more servants under their orders. Their duties were manifold. They summoned the meetings of the guild, presided over their deliberations, saw to the carrying out of the rules, collected the subscriptions and defended its rights against all attacks. When important affairs were in question, they convoked a general meeting at which all members were (page 45) obliged to assist. Everybody was entitled to give his opinion and the secret of the debates was strictly guarded. If it should happen that the

secret was betrayed by the wife of a guildsman, it was the guildsman himself who was punished, for it was with reason presumed that she could not have spoken, if he had kept good guard over his tongue.

When the guild's decisions concerned the general interest, they had, like the statutes, to be submitted to the supreme authority of the locality for ratification. The supreme regional authority left to the guild the task of regulating conditions of work, but they took the most meticulous care to see that the measures adopted by the guilds were not contrary to the general interest and the common good.

POLITICAL ROLE OF THE GUILDS

The guilds were more than civil personalities; they were also political personalities, that is to say, they had their say in communal affairs, and a very considerable part in the election of the communal magistrates. In many towns they had the lion's share, so that, to have the right to vote at all, it was necessary to be registered as a member of some guild. But this rigidly democratic system was far from being the best, because it took no account of other social bodies which had the right to be represented in the communal or municipal council, and because it put guilds of very unequal importance upon equal footing. The system which divided the electors into categories, each of which had a place in the election proportionate to its importance, was far preferable. Such, notably, was the electoral system of Dinant which grouped the entire population into three classes: the burgesses properly so called, the copperbeaters who formed the most important guild in the town and lastly, all the other crafts as a body. The two former groups nominated nine councilors each and the third, twelve: there resulted a council of thirty members which truly realized what would nowadays be termed the proportional representation of interests.

(page 46) In a word, the worker, or craftsman of the Middle Ages was not kept at a distance from the voting urn, or deprived of the right of taking part in public affairs. The humblest toiler, equally with the

proudest patrician, was interested in political life: it was anything but forbidden ground to the man who lived by the work of his hands.

THE GUILDS AND MILITARY SERVICE

Men who enjoyed such rights might well be glad to fulfill their duties. So it was that the workers were, in general, doughty soldiers who gladly took up arms for the defence of their country. Every guild formed a special company, so that, even in the army, fellow-guildsmen remained comrades fighting side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Many glorious victories were won by these valiant men whom the knights looked down upon and scornfully called them the foot (*Or "unmounted rank-and-file."* *It is difficult to render the meaning of the Old French word employed by the author.*) It was the "foot" of Flanders who, in 1302, won the great battle of the Golden Spurs over the flower of the French chivalry. The Walloon "Foot" were equal to the Flemish. In 1213 at the battle of La Warde de Steppes it was the butchers of Liege who decided the day and cut to pieces the nobility of Brabant.

SOCIAL POSITION OF THE GUILDS

Thanks to their union and their mutual understanding the artisans or workers attained a high social standing in their towns. They were, in fact, the most important element. They were not them relegated to a social level inferior to the burgesses or bourgeoisie; they themselves formed the bourgeoisie, so that the distinction made nowadays between the *bourgeoisie* and the workers was to them unknown. Far from being ashamed of being toilers, they were proud to be such, and had a singularly delicate sense of professional honour. Anyone who by his conduct or his associations besmirched the guild's escutcheon ([page 47](#)) was sternly excluded from membership. The insignia of their profession were held in honour and were proudly displayed on their banners. Everywhere, whether in processions in peacetime, or in military expeditions, the standards, decorated with the miner's pick or the carpenter's saw, could be seen fluttering proudly alongside the

pennons that bore the heraldic lions of the knights. To this day the armorial bearings of the craftsmen or workers may be seen in many a chapel of our larger churches adorning the windows where they were placed by the guilds, and when the sun lights up their brilliant colors, one seems to see, as it were, the workers themselves, transfigured by religion, resplendent in all the imperishable glory and magnificence of Christian toil.

CHAPTER III THE GUILD HIERARCHY

DIGNITY OF LABOUR

What has been said shows the high idea the guilds had of work. Every craft was held to be an art to which one was obliged in conscience to devote all one's attention. Even as no distinction was made between worker and burgess or bourgeois, so no distinction was recognized between artisan and artist. The two terms were synonymous and more than one marvelous masterpiece of the Middle Ages came from the hands of a modest craftsman (*see Belloc's Essay: "On Unknown People" in "On Something"*). There was a proverb for a flawless product to the effect that it was made "by the hand of a workman" (*the Proverb survives in such phrases as "A Workmanlike Translation"*). We shall now see at what cost the workers of other days attained this degree of technical superiority.

(page 48) THE APPRENTICE

In the first place, it was a principal of theirs, that before practising a craft, it was necessary to be a master of it, and in order to be a master of it, it was necessary to learn it. So it was that anyone aiming at a profession began by being apprenticed to it under a master. The apprentice had to be a Catholic, and, normally, of legitimate birth. He had also to be of a certain age, usually not less than twelve or thirteen years. Guarantees were accepted before the master accepted the

responsibility of an apprentice, and the parents handed over their child to him. This gave rise to a true contract clothed with the solemn forms that attested the importance of the affair. The contract of apprenticeship was sometimes signed in presence of the assembly of the guild, sometimes even before the aldermen in the guild hall, but always before witnesses chosen by both parties. The reciprocal engagements entered into were committed to writing and ratified by the craft itself as well as by the public authority.

The contract established the same relations between the master and his apprentice as between father and child. The master undertook to have the apprentice live in his house, to support and train him as his own child, to look after his religious and moral life with the greatest care, to guard him "*by door and bolt*," and in especial fashion to teach him his trade perfectly. The apprentice on his side was bound to look upon the master as his father, to honor him, to obey him, to fulfill faithfully the clauses of his contract and finally not to leave him before the time agreed upon. Such were the chief conditions on both sides, but one would never be finished, if one were to explain in detail the many precautions that were taken to safeguard all the rights of both parties.

The term of apprenticeship was usually long. Few and far between were the crafts wherein it lasted only two or three years; most of them required four or five years, and in some particularly difficult trades, like that of the goldsmiths or the weavers, it could last eight and even ten years. There was an additional reason for prolonging it. Generally, apprentices (page 49) paid the master nothing, not even for board and lodging, and were consequently a cause of no small expense to him, at least during the early years, and justice demanded that they should reimburse him by working a little beyond the time needed for their formation. This professional instruction was an immense boon for the apprentice. He was entitled to it and the master was bound in conscience to give it to him. In order that the master might not be led to neglect the education of the child, he was forbidden to have more than a certain number of apprentices. In many crafts this number was limited

to one or two or three. If it were found that a master was failing to instruct an apprentice, the latter had the right to leave the contract annulled, and, in this case, the guild-assessors found another master for him.

THE JOURNEYMAN

At the end of his apprenticeship, the apprentice took his place on the next rung of the guild ladder and became a journeyman, which, properly speaking, means a workman. Ordinarily, the years of apprenticeship were followed by one or two years travel abroad to complete the technical education of the young worker. This was called in France and Belgium "the tour of France." Carrying on his back a knapsack containing his few belongings and beguiling the way with many a joyous song the young workman went from town to town, stopping where he found work or pleasure, then passing on to visit new parts, becoming acquainted as he went with men and things. A conscientious and honest workman had in that way a fruitful supplementary training which brought him into touch with the more varied and less well known side of his art. He was generally sure of a hearty welcome, for everywhere he went, companies of journeymen opened their ranks to him and made it their business to find him occupation. The masters were nothing loath to employ strangers once these had furnished proof of their professional education. Often the advent of a stranger brought new methods into the workshops and thus improved the traditional ones. On returning to his own (page 50) district or country, the journeyman entered into the service of a master and took his place in the ranks of the profession. If he was unmarried, the master kept him in his own house, "by bread and tankard," as the old expression had it. Still, many guilds objected to this living-in, on the ground that it interfered with family life. In any case the unmarried worker was the exception, and from the moment he married he went to live apart and set up his own household. Many were content all their life long with the calm and peaceful existence of the journeyman. They were assured of their daily bread, and at the end of their day's work they found by their own fireside that modest

competence and that complete independence which gave rise to the proverb: "A poor man in his own home is a king."

THE MASTER

The more ambitious aspired to the rank of master-craftsman. Master-craftsmanship was, however, not easily attained. It was necessary to pass an examination and to submit to a series of tests similar to those in our universities. Manual labour was honoured equally with the liberal profession and the diploma of master-shoemaker, for instance, had to be striven for just like the diploma of engineer or lawyer.

A jury composed of master-craftsmen presided at the examination, which comprised a theoretical and a practical section. The theoretical section consisted of questions put by the jury on the principal points connected with the profession. Certain of the questionnaires have come down to us, and it is easy to see that the questions were no child's play. Printers, for instance, had to prove that they knew how to read Greek, and were expert in Latin. The practical part of the examination was, however, by far the more important. The candidate had to make a "masterpiece," either under the eye of the jury, or at least in circumstances such that fraud was impossible. It was the jury that chose the task to be executed. The following examples will give an idea of the high degree of technical ([page 51](#)) proficiency demanded from the master-craftsmen of the Middle Ages. A mason had to make an arch in stonework and a section of a spiral staircase. A house-painter had to paint a statue of the Blessed Virgin. A tailor had to make a priest's stole and a woman's dress. A cook had to prepare a large joint, two soups, six entrees, five roast dishes and nine side-dishes. How many masters of to-day would fail to qualify if called upon to pass such tests!

Once he had graduated as a master-craftsman, a man was received into the guild on taking an oath to keep its statutes faithfully. Thenceforward, he had, as our ancestors expressed it, "the use and freedom of the trade." A master could open a workshop,

employ journeymen and apprentices, give himself up to the practice of his profession with all the advantages attached to it and take a part in the meetings of the guild. Mastership was the highest degree of the craft-hierarchy and the man who had attained to it had no other ambition than to be always worthy of it.

RESULTS OF THE HIERARCHICAL ARRANGEMENT OF WORK

One thing is certain, beyond possibility of contradiction: all these precautions taken to train good workmen and good master-craftsmen had excellent results. The things that were made in the Middle Ages were, nearly always, excellently made. To this day, amateurs hunt for old hest, old locks, old manuscripts, old brass-work, in a word, for all that remains of the arts and crafts of former days. In them is found a deftness of touch and a perfection of finish that are truly amazing. Here it is a door-hinge, there again a wooden moulding, or a miniature manuscript which cost the craftsman incredible efforts. A piece of work well done lasted an indefinite length of time, so that dresses were handed down by will, and were worn from generation to generation. We still have books of six hundred years ago which are just as perfect as the day they left the hands of the copyist.

(page 52) **CHAPTER IV** **HOW THE SYSTEM WORKED**

Since the French Revolution, owing to the decay of the sense of solidarity in the Mystical Body and the suppression of the guilds, men have come to think of life as a battlefield where the weak are destined to become the victims of the strong. They call this the struggle of existence. These sinister notions have nowhere wrought such havoc as in the realm of industry. Competition has there become the sole rule and every man tries to produce at the cheapest in order to sell at the cheapest: for thus all his rivals are crushed. Everybody now realizes that to achieve this happy result either the workers' wages must be lowered or the public must be cheated in regard to the quality of the goods.

In the Middle Ages people thought differently. They believed men were made for mutual assistance not for mutual cannibalism. Their first concern was that the worker might be able to live honourably on the product of his labour, and that the public might be loyally served for their money. To this end every necessary means was adopted to prevent that unbridled competition through which some become unduly rich by exploiting their fellowmen, and reducing multitudes of them to misery.

THE PURCHASE OF PRIMARY GOODS

Many guilds were organized into co-operative associations for the purchase of raw materials which were shared out equally between the associates: this often lessened to a considerable degree the cost for each individual member. The guilds which left their members to themselves in the matter of replenishing their stocks, nevertheless kept a close watch lest anyone should attempt cornering. If a guild-member got a good bargain he was obliged to make it known to his fellow-guildsmen, so that they could enjoy the same advantages. Furthermore if he had succeeded in making a satisfactory deal with a supplier, any of his brethren was entitled to come into the bargain as (page 53) a third party on the same conditions. It was made utterly impossible to acquire raw materials at a cheaper rate than one's fellows and so secure a formidable initial advantage over them which would have continued through all the stages of production, and would have been a primary source of inequality.

COMMON WORKSHOPS

Where necessary the guild placed at the disposal of all its members' instruments for use at their work. Thus the tanners had a stripping-mill which all could use in turn. Similarly the rope-makers, the dyers and other crafts had common workshops, where all the guildsmen could carry on their work.

RULES GOVERNING PRODUCTION

Private workshops were, none the less, in the majority, but the work carried on in them was the subject of exacting regulations drawn up with a view to ensure the good quality of the goods produced. In general, the workshop had to be on the ground floor; it had to give on to the street, to be adequately lighted, to be always open to inspection by the appointed members of the craft who came to see that all was being carried out according to the prescribed rules. It might be said that the public themselves assisted at the making of the goods they bought, for, as a general rule, the shop and the workshop were one.

It would take too long to enter into the details of the rules governing and specifying the method of production of each article. Every effort was made to exclude fraud, and the statutes of each craft pursued any infringement with a vigilance and a strictness that were not easily outwitted. Punishment was meted out not only for the use of bad raw materials, but also for faulty methods of production and even for those methods which, without being fraudulent, yet rendered difficult the detection of fraud. In this connection some crafts had a detailed code. Thus, for example, the cloth-makers regulated (page 54) the length and breadth of the pieces of stuff, the quantity and the quality of the thread, the kind of material, etc. It was the same with the upholsterers and the goldsmiths, in a word, in all the trades that involved complicated methods of production.

Once the article was thus finished under the eyes of the public, it was still necessary in several trades, to submit it to the inspection of the experts before it could be put up for sale. Were it found wanting, it was either torn up or destroyed or sold as rubbish. Only if it had all the qualities required by the statutes did the experts authorize its being offered for sale: in this case it was usually stamped with the guild seal.

SALE

Usually wares were sold at home in the workshop, but many trades had a hall also where every guild-member, on payment of a small contribution, had his own stall. Finally, the great annual fairs of the neighboring towns gave everybody an opportunity of getting rid of his surplus stock on an international market where there were great crowds and intense commercial activity.

But the guild watched with the most anxious care to see that buying and selling went on under conditions of the strictest equality. Hours of sale were limited; the degrading modern system of unrestrained boasting of one's wares was forbidden; nobody had the right to attract to himself a buyer who stopped before a colleague's stall - still less was it allowed to sell at a price below that fixed by the guild.

GUARANTEES ACCORDED TO BUYERS

One must not conclude from this last mentioned veto that the public, to whom good articles were guaranteed, were obliged to pay arbitrary prices. Of course, if the guild had the absolute right to fix prices, such an abuse could have arisen. But the guild itself had to reckon with foreign competition which, though excluded in ordinary times, enjoyed perfect freedom during (page 55) the whole period of the annual fair. On that occasion, the arrival of strangers who left no stone unturned to attract custom, would have been enough to recall the guild to a sense of just dealing and to keep prices at an equitable level. Moreover, the masters in each craft had themselves the right, during the whole year, of selling the produce of foreign industry provided it was submitted beforehand to the control of experts or of an examining board appointed by the guild. Competition, subject to these restrictions, not only had no ruinous effects on the guild, but prevented producers from forming combines to dominate the market: it also forced home-industry to maintain always a high standard of production so as to keep its patrons.

CHAPTER V

THE CONDITION OF THE WORKERS

From what has preceded, it can be gathered, that the conditions of the workers in the Middle Ages were better than they are to-day. In fact, once see to it that unchecked competition does not force the master to go on lowering his scale of wages, and there is every chance that the worker will have a just remuneration for his work.

On the other hand, the regime of small-scale industry (the consequence of measures taken to ensure equality between masters) was also very favourable to the worker. The immense distance which to-day separates the worker from the master was utterly unknown to the craftsmen of the Middle Ages in many trades. Ordinarily the master had begun by being a craftsman himself; similarly the craftsman had every chance of becoming a master himself some day. Master and craftsman had worked together at the same tasks, in the same workshops, in the same brotherly deference to the sacred law of toil. They ate at the same table, often lived under the same roof, and in every way lived the greater part of their lives together. Their social standing was not appreciably different.

(page 56) The master's profit was just about double the wages he paid to one of his craftsmen, and even in that was included what he needed as a return for the capital invested and for the upkeep of his establishment. Their interests were almost identical, and as for causes of friction between them, they were far fewer than to-day.

Religion was there too insisting that the craftsman should be respected as a human person raised to the dignity of member of Christ, and not exploited like a machine or a beast of burden. All the arrangements we are going to pass in review were inspired by this fundamental principle of the Divine Order of the world.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Women were given a position demanded by the dignity of their sex and by their duties as mothers of families. They were not excluded from work: indeed there were some guilds exclusively for women, as for instance, the Milliners' Guild. A widow could carry on her husband's industry for her own profit, and if she took a second husband from among the journeymen of the same craft, he acquired the mastership by the fact of his marriage without having to pass a test. But the women always worked at home, occupied in a way suited to their sex and their strength. At Valentia, in Spain, there was a proverb which ran like this: "The wife at home: the husband in the workshop."

The shameful promiscuity of the factory such as many industrial districts still tolerate, would have filled our ancestors with loathing. They would have been indignant at seeing women and young girls going down into pits that are the grave of womanly honour. Those that were employed in the coal industry never worked anywhere except above ground.

As to children, they were not allowed to work until they had attained a certain age which varied according to the nature of the work involved. Very rarely did they work until they were ten or twelve years old, and then, the less strenuous tasks were assigned to them.

(page 57) LENGTH OF THE WORKING DAY

Neither did anyone think he had a right to overwork adult workers. In the first place, the greater number of crafts strictly forbade night work. The duration of day work was ordinarily estimated by the duration of daylight, so that in certain crafts it was eight hours in winter and sixteen hours in summer. In a day of sixteen hours, however, an hour and a half was allowed for dinner and half an hour for what we should nowadays call "tea." Moreover, work ceased on the afternoon of Saturday and of the eves of feasts. Finally, in estimating the length of the working day the difficulty of the work was fully taken into account.

Our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *On the Condition of the Working Classes*, says that the number of hours in the working day should be proportioned to the physical strength of the work; he adds: "Those who work in mines and quarries, and extract coal, stone, and metals from the bowels of the earth, should have shorter hours in proportion as their labour is more severe and trying to health" (*Rerum Novarum*, Catholic Social Guild Translation). Now this injunction of the Sovereign Pontiff was realized in the Middle Ages. The miner's day in Germany was only eight hours, and in the Liege district, six. This is a remarkable example of the antiquity as well as the continuity of the precepts of the Church in a matter which so closely touches the most vital interests of the working class.

THE SUNDAY BEST

But daily labour, even though not excessive, would end by wearying men out and brutalizing them. Science has shown how they need to rest on the seventh day in order to recover their strength fully, while religion teaches that the seventh day is equally necessary for fulfilling one's duties towards God and one's neighbor. The Lord's Day was kept, as it should be kept.

(page 58) Religion and the workers' interests were in accord here as in everything else, for there was no rigorism in the application of the divine precept. Some trades, in order to cope with unforeseen needs, authorized one or two of their members, in turn, to keep their shops open on Sunday. This was done notably by the goldsmiths of Paris in the time of Saint Louis. The money gained on that day, however, was considered sacred, and was put into a special box that was exclusively reserved for works of charity. It is easy to imagine what attraction the day of rest had for the worker, seeing that after having sanctified it by the practice of religion, he consecrated the remainder of it to the family circle. Master of himself, shaking from his clothes the dust of work, and from his heart the burden of care, uniting himself more closely to God, and immersing himself in the supreme calm that seemed to come down from heaven to

earth, he gained reserves of physical strength for the rest of the week and renewed, at their source, all the noble sentiments that stir the human heart. The unfortunate discoverers of the secular Sunday that is called "Blue Monday" are ignorant of all these things; their so-called rest, given over to drink, is nought but an extra drudgery having behind it shame and misery.

SALARY OF THE WORKERS

A question so important as that of the worker's wage was naturally not left to caprice. Competition being restricted within just limits, the spurious "iron law of wages" did not exist. Yet it is not easy after all to say what the workers got in terms of modern money. One the one hand, the value of money has very much changed at various periods and we do not know it exactly for each period. On the other hand a great number of workmen were boarded and lodged at the master's house, and that naturally counted as part of their salary. A good table was kept; there was plenty of meat, and beer or wine was drunk at each of the two meals. We have the accounts of the mines at Forez in France for the middle of the fifteenth century and we find therein that the workers (page 59) were adequately nourished, that their beds were excellent, and that in winter there were fires in their sleeping rooms. At about the same period in Germany, some of the masters complained that their craftsmen demanded more than one kind of meat at supper. "That is unreasonable," they said - and everybody will agree that they were right.

THE MINIMUM WAGE

In the Middle Ages no one dared to hold that a worker's wages need not be sufficient to keep himself and his family. As a matter of fact there was no discussion about the minimum wage, but everybody paid it. It was fixed, sometimes by the guild itself, sometimes by the commune, and sometimes again by the King, that is to say, in modern language, by the "State." At Ghent, the master, on taking up his position, had to swear never to work himself or to make others work at a wage below the

fixed one. In 1708, the commune of Tirlemont, in fixing the scale of wages for masons, enacted that if the master-mason lowered the wages of his workers, he should be obliged to charge the public a correspondingly lower price. This was an ingenious precaution to prevent the lowering of wages, and it must, doubtless, have been effective.

But general rules drawn up by the commune, or by the State, had not enough elasticity to be capable of being applied to all the particular cases that arose at different times and places. Accordingly, it was the guild for the most part that fixed the scale of wages. Now, as we have seen, the guild or corporation, was composed of workers as well as masters. The workers had their say in the election of the assessors or board of examiners and often they chose a certain number of the members of this board, while leaving the choice of the rest to the masters. In these circumstances the fixing of a minimum salary was the outcome of an agreement between masters and journeymen. A better method could not be devised.

Disputes were not, of course, entirely obviated, but let an example be given (it is a very attractive one) of the way in which such disputes were settled. In 1325 in the Drapers' ([page 60](#)) Guild at Liege a dispute arose between the masters and the artisans, on the subject of wages. How did they settle it? They agreed to nominate a commission of arbitration consisting of four members, all experts in the craft, of whom two were chosen by the masters and two by the artisans. This commission, which thus represented both sides, put a decisive end to the quarrel. The guild was so content with the decision that we find the commission of arbitration again functioning on several occasions during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its decisions were subject to no appeal and were sanctioned by stern penalties. If, on being ordered by it to do so, a master had not paid the artisan within three days the wages that were his due, the commission could forbid all artisans of the guild to work for him.

THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

It was everywhere recognized that the artisan had the right to cease work if his wages were not paid. The miners of the Liege country called a strike a "pit holiday-making." As human nature is everywhere weak since the Fall, the use to which they put this right was not always praiseworthy. When minds became excited a strike was called for the flimsiest of motives, and sometimes lasted disproportionately long. The strike of the artisan-bakers of Colmar, called in 1495, lasted ten years.

VETO ON COALITIONS

The masters, we may rest assured, were not at the mercy of their artisans, or obliged to accept all their conditions. In the first place, the professional education of the guild sufficiently enlightened the workers with regard to the limits of their natural rights and thus prevented them from formulating unreasonable demands. Next, they were forbidden to form coalitions with a view to wresting from the masters an increase of wages or a diminution of the working hours per day determined by the whole trade. In addition, the masters were forbidden to (page 61) pay wages in excess of those fixed by the guild for that would have disorganized its functioning and ruined those of the guildmembers who could not afford to pay the increased wages. The regulations were never preoccupied with the interests of one of the parties to the exclusion of the other; they always strove to do full justice both to artisan and master. If the measures taken in favour of the workers were more numerous it was because they had the greater need of protection, on account of their weakness.

VETO ON THE TRUCK SYSTEM

Amongst abuses, there is one which cries to heaven for vengeance: it is the detestable practise which the English call the "truck-system." This consists in paying the worker at least part of his wages in goods, on which the master makes a profit. Since the French Revolution, this

criminal practise has spread almost everywhere. Our ancestors denounced it and severely condemned it. Here are the noble words of the Prince-Bishop of Liege, John Theodore of Bavaria, in his enactment of 4th September, 1745: "An abuse so flagrant and so reprobated by all laws, human and divine, must be regarded as a defraudation of the wages earned by the poor worker in the sweat of his brow. So unjust is it that nothing more is needed to call down the anger of God upon those who practise it or who seek to hide it. Wherefore we solemnly declare that the instructions given on this subject, on My 22nd, 1739, and February 8th, 1742, should be carried out to the letter. In future all merchants of weapons and nails, all cloth-makers and other traders, as also all manufacturers and masters of factories and mines without exception, must conform to those instructions and pay the salaries of those whom they employ, in cash and not otherwise."

Thus spoke a Bishop, just as the French Revolution was preparing to destroy his principality. Up to the very last moment, the Catholic Church remained faithful to the cause of the worker, and the destroyers have succeeded in setting up the institutions "destined to safeguard popular liberty" only by walking over her prostrate body!

(page 62) **CHAPTER VI**

THE REVIVAL OF THE GUILDS

The hour has struck for the reorganization of labour and for the calling together of the workers to defend their interests, by grouping them, as in former times, in associations for mutual assistance. Pope Leo XIII asks for it and everywhere the workers are answering his call. After the harsh winter of a hundred years which has passed over the guilds, they are now beginning to blossom again everywhere, like trees at the approach of spring. If God shall breathe into them the breath of life, they will restore to the world of the factory and the workshop the social rank which these have lost; they will weld anew the golden chain of Catholic tradition; they will give a new direction to the march of

civilization. Needless to say, it is not question purely and simply of a return to the past, for political and social conditions have changed. Centralized States exist everywhere; large scale industry, thanks to the coming of the machine, has taken the place of the small; the market for goods has become international. The guilds of the Middle Ages, which had an organization adapted to a state of affairs so different from our own, could not now render us the service they once did. But the principle that gave birth to them, the principle of the solidarity of the members of the Mystical Body, remains ever the same and can be as fruitful to-day in new applications as it once was. One of these applications will be found in the modern equivalent of the guild, namely the Christian Syndicate or Vocational Group. Adapted to the manifold needs of the modern way of living, inspired by the spirit of brotherly love, between members of Christ actual and potential and nourished by the full doctrine of the Mystical Body, it will become the means of restoring order and justice in the place of modern economic confusion.

If it be asked how can this be, the answer is that the Christian Corporation or Vocational Group will restore the full Christian idea of work: "In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy (page 63) bread." This divine oracle has a double significance. It means that men must work, for work is divinely ordained, but also that work shall sustain the worker and enable him to develop his personality in and through Christ. There will be a complete change, the moment that society realizes that the second part of the divine oracle is addressed to society itself. None of the abuses which degrade the modern workshop will be allowed to subsist. People will return (never to forsake it again) to an organization of labour which is not a Utopia seeing that it actually functioned for centuries to the satisfaction of all. The hard-working and honest artisan will no longer have to face excessive hours, insufficient wages, and insecurity as to the future. Those sophists will be laughed to scorn who in order to defend all these abuses allege the determinism of economic laws. The so-called laws which oblige industry to be unjust will not be allowed to prevail against the Law of God which makes of Justice the cornerstone of society.

May the Mystical Body of Christ and the guild be the motto of all workers! May they insert it at the beginning of their statutes and embroider it on the silk of their standards! Above all, may they engrave it on the tablets of their hearts!

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

The union of Christian charity and justice in social relations which were the fundamental principles of the guild organization of the Middle Ages, have been beautifully expressed by Pope Pius XI, in the Encyclical Letter *On the Social Order*. "Clearly charity," he writes, "cannot take the place of justice unfairly withheld. But, even though a state of things be pictured in which every man receives at last all that is his due, a wide field will nevertheless remain open for charity. For justice alone, even though most faithfully observed can remove the cause of social strife, but can never bring about a union of hearts and minds.

"Yet this union, binding men together, is the main principle of stability in all institutions, no matter how perfect they may ([page 64](#)) seem, which aim at establishing social peace and promoting mutual aid. In its absence, as repeated experience proves, the wisest regulations come to nothing. Then only will it be possible to unite all in harmonious striving for the common good, when all sections of society have the intimate conviction that they are members of a single family and children of the same Heavenly Father, and further, that they are 'one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another' (Rom. XII, 5), so that "if one member suffer anything, all members suffer with it" (I Cor. XII, 26). Then the rich and others in power will change their former negligence of their poorer brethren into solicitous and effective regard; they will listen with kindly feeling to their just complaints, and will readily forgive them the faults and mistakes they possibly make. Workingmen too will lay aside all feelings of hatred and envy, which the instigators of social strife arouse so skillfully. Not only will they cease to feel weary of the position assigned them by Divine Providence in human society; they

will become proud of it, well aware that every man by doing his duty is working usefully and honourably for the common good, and is following in the footsteps of Him, Who, being in the form of God chose to become a carpenter among men, and to be known as the Son of a carpenter."